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## Decentering Phallocentrism: A Structural and Psychoanalytic Review of Stephanie Sy-Quia's *A Private Man*

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تفكيك المركزية عن الهيمنة الذكورية في الكتابة النسوية المعاصرة: مراجعة بنيوية

وموضوعاتية لرواية "رجل خاص" لستيفاني سي-كيا

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### Abstract

*A Private Man* is a novel that employs techniques of self-reflexivity, temporality and narrative fluidity in order to contrast the two lives lived by its central character, David. At the outset is the performative life this character has lived as a priest. Underneath the facade of his priesthood is the private, clandestine life that he lives in which, albeit subconsciously at times, he challenges the ways of the world he was born into and yearns for an alternate reality. With the arrival of Margaret, that yearning takes the form of an actual reality, and his public and private worlds converge into one. All of this has been narrativised by the author in a manner akin to stream-of-consciousness, with plotlines converging and collapsing at random and sometimes critical junctures. The analysis depicts how this mode of writing, characterised as feminine by theorists such as Helene Cixous and Deborah Tannen, allows the author to displace certain phallogentric assumptions about a man's world; foregrounds women's cognitive and bodily experiences and ironically helps invert stereotypes associated with gender roles and social expectations of men and women.

**Keywords:** écriture féminine genderlect theory stereotypes women writers women's writings

### الملخص

رواية "رجل خاص" هي عمل روائي يوظف تقنيات التأمل الذاتي، والزمنية، والسيولة السردية من أجل المقارنة بين الحياتين اللتين عاشهما بطلها المحوري، ديفيد. في البداية، نجد الحياة الأدائية التي عاشها هذا الشخص بصفته كاهناً. وتحت واجهة كهنوته تكمن الحياة الخاصة السرية التي يحياها، والتي يتحدى من خلالها - وإن كان ذلك بشكل لا واعٍ في بعض الأحيان - أعراف العالم الذي وُلد فيه، ويتوق إلى واقع بديل. ومع قدوم مارغريت، يتخذ هذا التوق شكل واقع فعلي، فينصهر عالمها العام والخاص في واحد. وقد سردت المؤلفة كل ذلك بأسلوب يماثل تيار الوعي، حيث تتقاطع الخطوط السردية وتتهار في منعطفات عشوائية وأحياناً حرجة. يُظهر هذا التحليل كيف أن نمط الكتابة هذا، الذي وصفته منظرات مثل هيلين سيكسو وديبورا تانين بأنه نسوي، يتيح للمؤلفة إزاحة افتراضات معينة قائمة على الهيمنة الذكورية حول عالم الرجل؛ ويُبرز التجارب المعرفية والجسدية للنساء، ويساعد بشكل ساخر على قلب الصور النمطية المرتبطة بالأدوار الجندرية والتوقعات الاجتماعية من الرجال والنساء. الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتابة النسوية، نظرية اللهجة الجندرية، الصور النمطية، الكاتبات، كتابات المرأة

### Introduction

Current literary scholarship continues to prove the historical claims of écriture féminine and genderlect theories true despite heavy criticism of essentialism levied against them. Claims of expressions rooted in gender or biological differences run the risk of asserting and reinforcing certain stereotypes, but modern female scholarship is now finding new ways of using similar strategies to newer ends.

Instead of applying temporality, fluidity and emotionality to specifically female-centred texts, modern writers, especially women, are starting to apply these techniques to narratives that centre around men; reshaping how men's conversational and dialogue patterns were seen historically.

The novel *A Private Man* penned by Stephanie Sy-Quia is a staple example of such resistive writing. The novel, penned by a woman, centres a male character as its protagonist, and employs stream-of-consciousness, fluidity and temporality to narrativise his aspirations, motivations, goals, actions, feelings and life journey. In doing so, she topples many expectations of masculine behaviour typically exhibited in male writings. No longer led by an emphasis on logic and structure, *A Private Man* leads primarily by emotion. The actions and motivations of both its male and female characters dissolve and reemerge throughout the texts in non-linear sequences, foregrounding emotions over a logical flow of events to a singular comprehensive conclusion. There is, as a matter of fact, no conclusion. The novel's ending is paradoxically cyclical in that it begins with addressing a person's death and ends with the birthing of life. The reflective narrativization of a private man's life this way sometimes reinforces and sometimes challenges certain assumptions that genderlect theories have claimed as essential differences between men's and women's writings.

### **The claims of Genderlect Theory and Ecriture Féminine and the Research Framework**

The genderlect theory simply postulates that men and women foreground different purposes as well as techniques while using language both in text and in conversations in a social setting. Men, according to the theory, use language as a means to negotiate status. For these reasons, they place a great premium on structure, order and reason, since these are the tools needed to convince and persuade others of your position. On the other hand, women use language as a means of building friendship and solidarity (Tannen, 1990, p. 42).

The genderlect theory also marked certain signifiers that women use in order to give supportive feedback and establish themselves as active listeners. Their conversations are often punctuated with hedges and indirect questioning aimed at minimizing direct conflict. Men's conversations, on the other hand, are characterized by linearity and an emphasis on overt structure and order (Tannen, 1990, p. 24).

This contrast between men's and women's modes of engaging in conversation spills over into other areas of life, including authorship. This is where the écriture féminine theory steps in and explains how, in writing, women precede emotionality and reflection over logic and linearity. In addition, women writers attempt to foreground women's bodily and cognitive experiences as a way to displace the phallogocentric structuring and understanding of this world.

While both genderlect and écriture féminine theories have had their share of criticism, the analysis depicts how the claims regarding the preferred mode of writing posited by these theorists in fact hold true for contemporary literature. The study analyses Stephanie Sy-Quia's *A Private Man*, both on structural and linguistic levels and dissects how, despite its male protagonist figure, the dominant mode of narrative remains what can be qualified as feminine in that it is non-linear, denying strict logic and structure and instead of seeking an active resolution, focuses more on reflection and making peace with the life lived, especially one that is lived privately for oneself instead of one that is performative.

### **Research Question**

The study will seek answers to the following two enquiries:

1. How does the novel *A Private Man* decenter phallogocentrism and in its stead, promote a feminine self-reflexivity in narrative using bodily, fluid and temporal narrations?
2. To what extent do the postulates of genderlect and écriture féminine theory hold true for the novel *A Private Man*, which the study has sampled as an example of contemporary scholarship by women?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study's significance lies in its ability to showcase how certain controversial and academically-challenged theories about essential differences between men's and women's writings, in particular the genderlect and écriture féminine theory, continue to hold true, prompting continued investigations into how and to what extent women have been able to decenter phallogocentric ways of narrativizations. This study is also significant because of its contributions towards scholarship that focuses on women's way of making sense of this world, specific manners of ordering and structuring events and insistence on self-reflection over action.

### **Literature Review**

Ever since the second and third waves of feminism, the inquiry into male and female modes of writing has always been pervasive. A key question that surfaced during the literary and feminist revisioning in the late twentieth century was about whether the English language was inherently sexist and patriarchal, reinforcing gender stereotypes and limiting expression for women. This paved the way for the emergence of two literary theories that aimed at deconstructing the ambiguous institutionalisation of linguistic sexism through language: the genderlect theory by Deborah Tannen and the French *écriture féminine* theory. Although the former is rooted in sociolinguistics and the latter in poststructural feminism, both serve as ways of understanding how languages shape communication and expression, with a particular emphasis on how this expression is different for men and women.

More specifically, genderlect theory examines language at a modular level; focusing on conversational and linguistic elements to see how they give way to distinct subcultures for men and women (Tannen, 1990, p. 42). *Écriture féminine*, developed by French feminist theorists Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, focuses on writing by women, claiming that these resist patriarchal structures and influences by reshaping textual language and reflecting purely feminine experiences (Cixous, 1976, p. 875).

### Origins and Development

*Écriture féminine* theory came about primarily from feminist poststructuralist writings, specifically Helène Cixous's essay titled "The Laugh of Medusa", in which she urged women writers to write through the body and fight back against the prevailing patriarchal discourse (Cixous, 1976, p. 880). What Cixous meant by that was that women should focus more on their specific bodily experiences and sensations against the traditional focus on trying to understand the world in terms of strict and decisive structures. Cixous was of the opinion that the prevalent discourse was male-oriented and reinforced phallogocentric perspectives in its rigidity and emphasis on rationality and logicity. (Cixous, 1976, p. 883). This prompted her to urge women to create their own forms of writing that can disrupt this emphasis on order and linearity.

Contributing further to this poststructuralist analysis of language, Luce Irigaray commented that patriarchal discourse often marginalises women's experiences and reduces them to objects, especially in male discourses, and, like Cixous, proposed a mode of writing that was multilayered and opposed to structural rigidity. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 133). In other words, writing by women should be more fluid and prioritise women's experiences. Bringing a psychoanalytic dynamic to this theory was Julia Kristeva, whose distinction between the symbolic and semiotic order further differentiated between male and female modes of writing. The symbolic order for Kristeva was marked by rigid structures and fixed perceptions, whereas the semiotic order of writing was marked by bodily drives, emotion and rhythm (Kristeva, 1984, p. 25).

Women's writing, therefore, becomes something much bigger than simply writings produced by women. They become forms of challenging the prevalent linguistic status quo in sometimes obvious and at times subtle and fluid ways.

### Characteristics of *Écriture Féminine*

Noticeable characteristics of women's writings, according to *écriture féminine*, therefore, are fluidity, temporal fragmentation, multiplicity and heightened emotions. A key feature of feminine writings is the application of the stream-of-consciousness and non-linear mode of narration. These sentiments are also mirrored by researcher Tori Moi, according to whom, women's writing aims at expressing female experiences outside the fixed binaries that are part of the male discourse. This way, these writings are able to resist closure and any essential interpretation (Moi, 1985, p. 112). Women's writings, therefore, highlight historically ostracised perspectives, emphasising the embodiment of domestic experiences in a way that truly captures the female point-of-view.

This theory has been applied by other literary researchers. A key study in this regard is by Gilbert and Gubar, who write in "The Madwoman in the Attic" that nineteenth-century women writers tried resisting patriarchal structures through their writings (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 73). And their analysis sparked a more prominent debate around how women's writings differed from those of men.

This belief about the distinctive female narrative voice continues to be voiced in current scholarship. One example is the study by Tamara Wagner, according to whom, female texts of experimental nature often strive to destabilise the prevalent phallogocentric discourse (Wagner 2021, p. 91). According to another researcher Susan Rubin Suleiman, fragmented narrative structures are a conspicuous feature of writings

authored by women, often aiming at challenging the patriarchal authorities and expectations (Suleiman, 2019, p. 64).

### Critiques of Écriture Féminine

However, the theory has also had its share of criticism, primarily for its promotion of essentialist ideologies. The primary argument against écriture féminine is that attributing text types that are non-linear and unstructured writing to women runs the risk of stereotyping women as emotional and irrational. A similar criticism is launched by Tori Moi (Moi, 1985, p. 119), according to whom écriture féminine romanticises differences between masculinity and femininity, while also exaggerating them. In addition, Judith Butler, in her seminal work titled *Gender Trouble*, proposed that écriture feminine promotes some kind of a stable female identity when, in reality, the very concept of gender is socially constructed and is more performative than essential (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Another criticism against écriture féminine is the idea that it presupposes the white experience as universal. For example, in a study, Chandra Mohanty argues that (Mohanty 1988, p. 66) that western feminist theory has traditionally failed to take into account the racial, cultural, economic and political differences between women of various groups. Despite its shortcomings, however, it cannot be argued that écriture feminine lends important insights into the often invisible relations between language, society and power.

### The Genderlect Theory

A related theory on how women's writings manifest their experiences in ways distinctive from men is the Genderlect theory. The word is coined by conjoining the words gender and dialect. The idea is that just as how dialects vary in their linguistic, symbolic and semantic forms, women's writings can also be seen as a dialect in its own right. In her seminal work, "You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation", Deborah Tannen popularized the phenomenon of a genderlect that is shaped by social interactions (Tannen, 1990, p. 24). In other words, boys and girls are influenced to use language differently by the social groups they are usually a part of.

Tannen's work was significantly inspired by the research performed by Maltz and Boker earlier, which stipulated that boys and girls are directly and indirectly taught different communication styles during their childhood, which can be seen as actual subcultures within a society (Maltz & Borker, 1982, p. 205). Tannen elaborated this finding in a more comprehensive way, turning it into a sociolinguistic theory.

Tannen could actually identify linguistic differences between boys and girls from the same community. She describes the phenomenon of "report talk", a term that refers to the information, and status-oriented language predominantly used by men, and which actively reinforces men's status as emotionally independent and rational. Women, on the other hand, engage in what Tanne calls "rapport talk". This contrasts with the former in its emphasis on building emotional connection with the auditor, and focus on intimacy and mutual understanding (Tannen, 1990, p. 77). In her study, Jennifer Coates made a similar discovery. According to the researcher, men engage in what is called a competitive conversational pattern in which they subconsciously vie for the platform. Women, on the other hand, engage in support listening patterns, offering regular feedback. (Coates, 2004, p. 102).

In addition, Coates was of the opinion that women's conversations involved some sort of collaborative listening. This involved minimal interruptions and shared storytelling. They also cooperate more towards developing topics of shared interests (Coates, 1996, p. 78). This sentiment is further supported by a study by Janet Holmes, according to whom, politeness and positive feedback are the main tools that women use in order to build female solidarity (Holmes, 1995, p. 15). Researcher Pamela Fishman's studies also highlighted how women prioritised emotional connectivity and positively shared the burden of interactional work, thus prioritising maintaining relationships without dominating conversations (Fishman, 1983, p. 92).

### Applications of Genderlect Theory

One advantage of the genderlect theory is its application across various social sectors, from the workplace to media and literature. Gender communication patterns and their goals have been studied extensively by scholars in different socio-political areas, and findings have confirmed the differences between the two. Tannen's studies specifically showed how men looked at conversation as an opportunity to negotiate for status, while for women, it is mostly an opportunity for relationship building and dissolving conflict and differences. A recent study by Alshboul and Alshboul suggested that the different conversational styles of men and women, as well as the purposes to which these are applied are even

manifest in the current social media language employed by male and female users. While digital platforms are actively working to blend such essentialist differences, but shades of rapport talk and report talk continue to manifest on these platforms (Alshboul and Alshboul, 2024, p. 12)

A 2024 study from Belen et al showcases how these gendered communicative differences even manifest in education since male and female students also adopt different conversational strategies in class, when they are questioning, resolving conflicts, or sharing opinions (Belen et al., 2024, p. 29).

Modern literary scholarship also lends itself easily to such a dissection of women's communicative style. The study combines the concepts of both *écriture féminine* and the genderlect theory to dissect how the author uses the techniques of bodily writing, fluidity and temporality in her narration and how this technique allows her to depict her male characters in ways that would be seen as largely feminine according to the tenets of the genderlect theory.

### Analysis

In many ways, the novel by Stephanie Sy-Quia continues to follow the conventions adumbrated by the champions of the genderlect dialect and theorists of *écriture féminine*. The following section will highlight how she foregrounds women's bodily experiences in an attempt to decenter masculine experiences as solely pivotal in society and how Sy-Quia's writing uses structural fluidity and temporality in a way that clashes with traditional phallogocentric ways of storytelling.

### Women's Bodies as a Means of Expression

Writings, chiefly by men and sometimes by women, have historically been accused of centering male experiences as being of fundamental importance and universal quality. Women characters seldom occupied centre stage, especially where questions of gravity and intellectualism were concerned, and where women's bodies were edified, there were always sexual undertones, if not overt objectifications. Women's bodies, in such writings, have often been seen as exotic and a primarily aesthetic entity. Sy-Quia's novel *A Private Man* is an example of how women are displacing this phallogocentric treatment of women and their physicality in literature and the arts at large.

Historically, in both art and literature, women's bodies were celebrated for their eroticism and proximity to the beauty standards set by society. Writers like Sy-Quia are trying to mainstream the raw, unaltered and natural forms of women's bodies for two primary reasons: the first is to displace the historically phallogocentric vision of what women's bodies must look like, and second, to use women's bodies as a narrative mode of their own. Sy-Quia is able to achieve that feat via two primary methods. First is her description of Margaret's physical body as observed by her husband. Second is the slipping of these observations between other banal events of life, using what the study earlier described as fluid narrative structures that somewhat resemble the stream-of-consciousness. The temporality and fluidity in her writing allow her to create an essential link between the physical form of Margaret and the physical world that David occupies. Subconsciously, it presupposes a woman's body as elemental in the physical world, displacing a phallogocentric insistence on the "male" as the primary creation. For example, consider the following passage:

The ghosts of her feet in her sandals, the smooth shallow vale left by her big toe. The nape of her neck, where the hair was no border but gradations of itself, soft then gathering, then a sonata. ... Her mouth pursed with pins. The bead curtain parted in the morning and the smell of coffee. Laundry flacking on the line. Her, holding a full, rotund jug; caught in the mirror: the water bearer, his slaker of thirsts. (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189)

The passage portrays the classic style of fluidity in writing and the subtle employment of the stream of consciousness to achieve the desired effect of a feminine outlook of life, with its insistence on domesticity, brought forth through images of a mouth "pursed with pins" (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189) and the "laundry flacking on the line" (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189). In this way, it centres the female body in the midst of the question of life itself. The various parts of Margaret, as well as her actions, remind David of the visible and invisible connections women have with the natural world around him and how these connections are pulsing through the jugular of life. Her hair reminds him of a "sonata" (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189); the "rotund jug" (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189) brings David's consciousness to the fact that she has been his "slaker of thirst" (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189). Later, the narrative continues in the following manner:

He finds himself, at the midpoint of his life, thrown inside a motif: the desert, a dry place of wandering and no water. And he finds it to be wrong. This land is a place of bright, tenacious life. You just have to be patient, and read the signs to look for it. (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189)

Once again, the fluidity of the narrative makes it difficult to rationalise the mental state of David: is he happy in his marriage, self-congratulating or compensating? There are no clear answers, which is how it is supposed to be since the end goal is not resolution but self-reflection. It is not designed to be deliberately obtuse for the sake of obtuseness. The ponderings of philosophers have historically been confounded once they arrive at the question of the meaning and purpose of life. As far as David is concerned, it is Margaret, both in her physical essence and as an embodiment of companionship, who reminds him of what life is supposed to entail and what it must look like. At another point, Margaret's body reminds him of the "Hagia Sophia" (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 189), it could perhaps be because of its largeness since she was expecting; it could also be because of the icy marble quality of her veiny skin; the reason is left unanswered.

The normalisation of Margaret's body, in particular, and women's bodies in general, was a process that was slow and somewhat arduous for David. Through him, the readers also slowly become comfortable with the raw and natural beauty of it. David's first intimate, but non-sexual contact with a woman's body occurs when his sister-in-law invites him to feel the baby growing in her belly. Those experiences place him directly in the natural quantum where a woman's body is not exotic and a thing for aesthetics, but has a functional and key natural purpose. In the passage itself, it is the beauty of this function, of creating life, that has been edified instead of the rotund belly. Stripped of any sexual innuendoes, this marks a primary moment in the passage when David learns to appreciate women and their bodies in a non-sexual way, instead of objectifying and othering them. The narrative places this body as the "norm"; as what is natural and tries its best to strip away feelings of discomfort and unnaturalness that have often been attributed to the bodies of pregnant women.

Once at Sunday lunch she was weightily pregnant and wearing a thin sundress, and a small pod-shaped surface protruded slightly, passing the circumference of the dome from within as if on a rail. He must have stared because she laughed at him. – It was just a hand! She was waving at you.

– How do you know it wasn't a foot?

– Because it didn't feel like a foot. Would you like to feel it?

He would. ... She smiled at him. He saw the truth then, in what was said about the beauty of pregnant women. Anna was not glowing; there was a small sheen of sweat on her nose, but she seemed wise, like a kind of mariner. (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 46)

Throughout the novel, Sy-Quia includes several references and visual images of pregnant women and always ties these to the question of the continuation of life. The task here appeared to be not just the appreciation of this wonder that women were able to perform, but also to demystify it; make it so recurrent that it is not "the other" thing anymore, but the centre of all existence.

David's later encounter with women's bodies happened primarily through his intimacy with his wife, and Sy-Quia painstakingly elaborates the journey David had to take to go from looking at Margaret as primarily the other sex and coming to terms with seeing her body as the very essence of life and becoming comfortable with it. He was, alternately, startled, ashamed of the startling, and bashful upon seeing her bare form and eventually grew to love it, even those parts that might be classified as unflattering aspects of it resulting from the intensive labour of growing a child within. Through David, the readers focus on Margaret variously: walking around a car "like a needle on a dial" (Sy-Quia, 2026, pg. 192), "barefoot, her white leather sandals" (Sy-Quia, 2026, pg. 192), or sometimes with "her face on her hand, her elbow on the armrest" (Sy-Quia, 2026, pg. 192). All these commonplace states in which one finds a woman are foregrounded in a way that infuses Margaret's character with humanity. Despite the observations of her coming from her lover, who loves her keenly and unabashedly, her humanness is emphasised, and, at least, active eroticism takes a backseat in this mode of writing

There are also other, more subtle ways in which Sy-Quia foregrounds women's bodily experiences through the lens of her female protagonist. One example is when he sees Margaret pin up her hair and imagines the ache she must experience in her arms from holding her hair up too long. In hindsight, most men would not understand or be actively aware that the seemingly innocuous action of doing one's hair can actually cause strain in a girl's arms; much less for someone like David, who did not have any direct experiences with girls for the greater portion of his life. It is obvious that Sy-Quia takes the authorial liberty

of attributing certain types of cognisance to her male characters that are predominantly female, but even if that is the case, it is only one little instance of subverting the premium placed on male experiences as universal, and for once, attributing that quality of universality to the female form. However, bodily writing is not the only way in which Sy-Quia attempts to replace phallogentrism with a feminine outlook. She also uses tools of structural and linguistic fluidity to achieve the same purpose.

### **Fluidity and Temporality as a Way to Destabilise Phallogentrism**

It is interesting how Sy-Qia's novel foregrounds male characters but dissects these characters in ways that are chiefly feminine, or at least feminine in the way *écriture* feminine categorises them. The novel features David and Margaret as the primary characters, and their grandson Adrian. The plot fluctuates between a past and a present that has been carved in an interesting, often reflective and sentimental manner. The past describes the gradually solidifying relationship that is construed between David Fletcher, a priest and Margaret, a budding feminist theologian who later gets employed at a Catholic college in Monks Kirby, and the present is a rather sorry tale of an elderly Margaret on the brink of perfect senility.

Their storyline alternates between a present where Margaret is now a bereaved grandmother, who is being looked after by her grandson Adrian. Two of the three primary characters in this novel are male, and yet the mode she uses to present their experiences, perceptions, motivations, aspirations, excitement and disappointment can be categorised as primarily feminine. One reason for this is the employment of the stream of consciousness and narrative fluidity throughout her novel. The constant cognitive deviations and hazy reflections that occur in the minds of David, Adrian and Margaret upon the sight of a certain object continue to break linearity in the story. The narrative often shifts from a description of the character's actions to an elaboration of what goes on in their cognitive space. Even the ways in which both Adrian and David understand and interpret the processes of the world appear more sympathetic towards the female experiences than the male's. This is another way that women writers can foreground female ways of reflection and emotionality as tools for understanding the world.

From the start, for example, Adrian, the grandson of David and Margaret, was depicted as shy and reserved, keenly observant and in tune with deeper emotions. He is acutely observing what goes on around him (which, the reader finds out, is his uncle's funeral) and this contrasts with the cold and almost unfeeling demeanour of his mother, who could not even make herself available to attend the funeral. The narrative here continues to shift back and forth between Adrian's physical state and his mental state. For example, talking to his aunt, Adrian learns of his grandfather's laicization. He does not quite understand what the term refers to, and googling it leaves him with more questions than answers. The narrative then shifts from characterising Adrian objectively to a self-reflection, which, as readers, we are unsure if it stems from Adrian or the narrator herself:

He googled it in the toilets.

Knowledge like a cord cutting.

He tried to call his mother, but the time difference was off. Only dawn in California. He was angry, embarrassed, already a little drunk. He went outside to stand in the undercroft of the clubhouse, staring out at the rain.

His grandfather had been a Catholic priest: a short story in ten words or fewer. And him the living proof. (Sy-Quia, 2006, pg. 8)

This constant shift between the characters' physical and mental states in a stream-of-consciousness mode continues to break the linearity of the narrative and challenge any notion of a universal or fixed meaning in writing. Multiple theories and explanations could surface to understand the movement of the plot from one event to the next.

But Sy-Quia does more than that. She inverts expectations when Margaret's own daughter fails to care for her in a way that is typically expected of daughters in particular and women in general, and it is Adrian who has to let go of his job to be the primary caregiver for his grandmother. The scenes where Adrian is caring for his ageing grandmother are perhaps some of the most solid examples of how, in women's writing, women foreground feminine ways of perception in the same way that, in men's writing, men foreground masculine ones.

Adrian's grandmother, Margaret, becomes increasingly irritable; however, unlike traditional expectations of men who would focus on providing immediate comfort, trying instead to quickly resolve the issue, or attempt to hand over the task to someone who they think would be more adept in this regard,

Adrian takes over the complete emotional and physical labour, but it's the former that is more profound. For starters, he's extremely kind to his grandmother. All of her erratic ways do not disturb him. He can put up with her crying for hours.

In a way, Adrian's reactions and behaviour are almost a woman's fantasy. He is the perfect caregiver. He is not bothered by the aberrations of her grandmother. He's not burdened by having to sit for long hours trying to understand the conversation that begins nowhere and ends the same. When he looks at his grandmother, his gaze is affectionate. He treats her with extreme tenderness and care. He calls her beautiful. All of these are ways that would traditionally be categorised as feminine ways of relationship building, at least, according to Tannen's genderlect theory.

There are not too many instances of dialogue between the characters. Genderlect theory primarily emphasises the use of language to build intimacy, but through the narration, it appears that Adrian is engaging in what could be described as feminine forms of social engagement. He gives his grandmother space to talk. He does not interrupt her. He is an active and supportive listener. He is emotionally present for Margaret grandmother and it is not amiss to the readers that this kind of intimacy building is not seen as traditionally masculine ways of connecting with others.

In a lot of ways this might be wishful fancy on the part of women for idealized visions of men. However, by foregrounding a character like Adrian, who has the wherewithal of looking after an ageing grandmother, and who is not shaken by the idea of having to decentre his own masculine traits and tendencies in order to care for another person, the writer is able to challenge the expectations that caregivers primarily need to be women. In contrast, Hillary, Margaret's daughter and Adrian's mother, is the one that shows tendencies that can be seen as more traditionally masculine. For example, not only she remains physically absent for the most part, she also does not go out of her way to provide any sort of comfort to her grandmother and oftentimes feels rather frustrated and constricted by the demands of Margaret. She has little patience with him and appears as a complete foil to Adrian's respect and patience. As a result, it is Adrian, and not Hilary, who quits his job in England to look after Margaret, when the norm is typically for women to assume that role.

Similarly, David is also a character emanating deep reflection that, sometimes, borders on femininity. This is not to say that it is his kindness or patience that makes him feminine but it is feminine in the way that the genderlect theory looks at certain cognitive functions overall. The femininity lies in David's willingness to relent and yield his previously uncertain self to a new-founded cognitive insistence on ruminating over the greater meaning of life, especially when it comes to women and their place in society. The narrative also often collapses to recede into a reflective mode of writing where it begins focusing on the mental states of its characters rather than their physical actions.

Passing through a certain place, the characters are reminded of a past event, and then the narrative slips into a description of those events using a stream-of-consciousness formula. This is one reason why we learn less of David's actual social contribution in The Catholic Church and the parish during his career as a priest, but learn more about him as a person and as a man of contrasting and often colliding world values. By foregrounding a character who is an embodiment of such contrasting perceptions, the writer is also able to make another argument in her novel, which emphasises the possibility of a healthy coexistence of contrasting values in one space. In other words, the writer challenges essentialism as much as she possibly can through each of her central characters: David, Adrian and Margaret. In contrast to the criticism that is laid against the theory of écriture feminine and genderlect theory that they foreground certain ways of writing as feminine and thereby stereotype women and their expression as erratic, the novel *A Private Man* actually does the opposite. It shows the possibility of attributing feminine ways of looking at the world and by constantly juggling her narrative with fluidity and temporality, the novel tries to normalise the fact that certain traits that are seen predominantly as feminine can, in fact, be exhibited by men. In this way, the novel does the exact opposite of what the critics apprehend. It does not stereotype masculine or feminine ways of thinking; it, in fact, subverts the stereotypical attributes by assigning them to the "wrong" gender.

## Conclusion

The novel set out to primarily investigate how classically feminine mode of storytelling allows women writers to decenter phallocentrism in literature. The analysis exposed how, contrary to popular criticism, the postulates of the genderlect theory and écriture femimine hold true regarding the employment of fluidity, temporality and female bodily experiences as a means to foreground feminine ways of perceiving

the world as well as highlighting primarily female experiences, making them the norm. In this way, writers are able to decenter phallogocentric ways of looking at things, which comprise a strict emphasis on structure and logic. It must be borne in mind that the idea is not that female writing is illogical, but that there are times when reason itself is grounded in emotional experiences of the characters. When the latter takes the centre stage, the mode of narration turns self-reflective, and the objective is not to seek a cathartic resolution to one's problem, but the journey of self-reflexivity itself is the catharsis that characters and readers are seeking.

To this end, the postulates of both the genderlect theory and *écriture féminine* appear to hold true and decades down the line, women authors continue trying to break through the historically dominant and one-dimensional structures of storytelling through alternate modes of narration in literature.

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